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RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH IMMEDIATE 9950  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 000015

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT TO NEA/ARP FOR JHARRIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/04/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: WORRIED ABOUT IRAN, SAUDIS TRY TO MOLLIFY PUBLIC  
ANGER OVER GAZA

REF: A. RIYADH 0001

[1](#)B. RIYADH 1871

[1](#)C. RIYADH 1868

[1](#)D. OPENNET GMP20090102869005

Classified By: DCM David Rundell for  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Key Points:

-- The Saudi government has sought to mollify strong internal public anger against Israel while working diplomatically through multilateral channels for an immediate cease-fire and a unified Arab/Islamic position to check what it sees as dangerous Iranian influence.

-- FM Saud,s public criticism of Palestinian divisions was driven by the Saudi conviction that Iranian/Syrian/Hizballah support for Hamas was intended to provoke Israel.

-- Seeking to constructively channel public agitation, the King ordered a national telethon for Gaza Palestinian relief, which raised approximately 100 million (US\$26.7 million) Saudi riyals on 3 January.

-- A group of Mecca scholars that included university professors and magistrates called for support of Hamas, terming resistance against Israel as "Sharia-justified jihad."

COMMENT:

(C) The Saudi government's reaction to the Gaza crisis is driven primarily by two factors: a need to prevent extremists and other opponents from exploiting domestic public anger to challenge the government, and a conviction that Iran is actively working in tandem with the Syrians and Hizballah to exacerbate tensions and thus extend its influence and increase Shia power throughout the region. Aware of public's need to actionably demonstrate solidarity with Gaza Palestinians, the Saudi government opened new avenues for constructive public action. Nevertheless, the SAG faces mounting, though largely privately-expressed, criticism for being unable to stop the violence, and its strategy for managing the crisis will be tested as the conflict drags on.

End Key Points and Comment.

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EXTERNALLY: IMMEDIATE CEASE-FIRE TO CHECK IRAN  
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[1](#)1. (C) IMMEDIATE CEASE-FIRE: Both publicly and privately, Saudi officials have made clear that their first priority is an immediate cease-fire, which they believe needs to be crafted through multilateral channels. The Saudis strongly

prefer to take action through regional, Arab and Islamic organizations, and have focused their diplomatic efforts on successive meetings of the GCC, Arab League and OIC. FM Saud al-Faisal traveled to New York on January 4 to press the Saudi views to members of the UNSC. However, despite their preference for coordinated Arab League action, divisions among Arab leaders, and particularly Saudi unhappiness with Syria and its allies, have led them to oppose Qatari calls for an Arab summit (again).

12. (C) IRAN CAUSING PALESTINIAN DISUNITY: While first and foremost condemning Israeli aggression, Saudi officials have also publicly castigated Palestinian divisions as being partly responsible for the situation. In his address to the Arab League Ministerial held in Cairo on December 31, Saud al-Faisal stressed that "this massacre could have been prevented had the Palestinian people taken a united stand under one leadership." Addressing the Palestinian people, he said further: "The Arab nation cannot extend a helping hand if you are not united." Though they are hesitant to say so publicly, Saudi officials have made clear that they believe that Iran, working through Syria and Hizballah, is actively working to divide the Palestinians. In a January 4 meeting with DCM, MFA Assistant Deputy Minister Prince Turki Bin Mohamed Bin Saud Al Kabeer pointed to a meeting between Iranian security chief Saeed Jalili, Syrian President Bashar Al-Asad and Hamas political bureau chief Khalid Masha'al in Damascus on January 3. "Although the Palestinians should adopt a unified position," Turki charged, "Hamas is awaiting instructions from Iran."

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RIYADH 00000015 002 OF 002

INTERNALLY, CHANNELING PUBLIC ANGER  
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13. (U) FOCUS ON HUMANITARIAN ACTION: The SAG has continued a vigorous humanitarian relief effort, with King Abdullah personally leading the campaign through well-publicized events such as visits to injured Palestinians in Riyadh hospitals. He ordered Interior Minister Nayef to lead a "goodness campaign" which took the form of a lengthy telethon and collection drive. The 11-hour telethon, titled the Saudi Popular Campaign for Relief to the Palestinian People, began at 4 p.m. local time on Saturday, January 3, and continued past midnight. Newspapers reported total donations between 92 and 120 million riyals (US\$24.5 to US\$32 million). The King committed the first 30 million riyals, while Crown Prince Sultan donated 10 million. Stadiums and television station offices transformed into collection sites, where Saudis donated a wide variety of in-kind goods. Multiple television stations carried the telethon, which in the background featured religious figures quoting Qu'ranic passages and the Prophet's comments on charity. Cameras captured images of people making donations around the country, including children giving toys.

14. (C) RED CRESCENT ACTION: In a January 5 meeting with DCM, Saudi Red Crescent President Prince Faisal bin Abdallah bin Abdalaziz Al Saud reported that the organization receives its funding from the government and does not raise its own funds. Prince Faisal said that Interior Minister Nayif was coordinating all fundraising for the Gaza relief effort, and added that the Saudi Red Crescent is sending only disaster relief, and not money, to Gaza. These supplies were being handed over to the ICRC and UNHCR at the Gaza border. The Prince noted that the Saudi Red Crescent was also coordinating the transportation of injured Palestinians to Riyadh and their placement in local hospitals.

15. (C) PREVENTING PUBLIC DISPLAYS. In a separate meeting with DCM, Deputy Minister of Interior Mohamed bin Nayef described the SAG's approach to dealing with the public outcry on Gaza. He explained that the telethon was intended to provide an avenue for the frustrated Saudi public to express their

concerns over Gaza, confirming that all the money collected will go into one central relief fund. Concomitantly, no public demonstrations would be countenanced, he explained, "since demonstrations always end in violence." To this point, on December 31 the Ministry of Interior denied a request by activists to conduct a New Year's Day sit-in to show solidarity with Gaza Palestinians. However, Eastern Province Shi'a have tested the government's ban on public demonstrations with small gatherings in Qatif and Safwa (refs A-C). (Comment: we expect there will be further attempted gatherings during the feast of Ashura. End comment.) The arrest of an independent imam who had called for violence against Israelis seems to have had the desired effect on messages emanating from government mosques throughout the Kingdom for the time being. Most mosque sermons on January 2 addressed the situation in Gaza by calling on Muslims to participate in humanitarian assistance efforts.

16. (C) SCHOLARS AND OTHER CRITICS: The enthusiasm displayed by telethon participants is not universally shared. On December 31 a group of prominent Mecca scholars, including several magistrates and professors at Umm al-Qura Islamic university, issued a statement urging Muslims and Arab governments to support Hamas (ref D). The statement declared that "what is being done by the valiant Islamic resistance, represented by the elected Palestinian government and by the Islamic resistance movement HAMAS, and by the various Islamic resistance movements in the occupied land of Palestine, is Sharia-permitted Jihad..." Likewise, despite the outpouring for the telethon, some Saudis questioned the campaign's logic. Privately and in comments posted on a variety of blogs and websites, some citizens criticized the emphasis on assisting victims of the violence, rather than focusing on stopping the violence altogether. Some Embassy contacts commented that their government should use more diplomatic muscle to stop the Israeli offensive.

FRAKER